

Indianapolis: The True Story of the Worst Sea Disaster in U.S. Naval History and the Fifty-Year Fight to Exonerate an Innocent Man

Jeffrey Bovarnick

Lynn Vincent

Sara Vladic

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Bovarnick, Jeffrey; Vincent, Lynn; and Vladic, Sara () "Indianapolis: The True Story of the Worst Sea Disaster in U.S. Naval History and the Fifty-Year Fight to Exonerate an Innocent Man," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 75: No. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol75/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

CAT-AND-MOUSE GAMES

Indianapolis: *The True Story of the Worst Sea Disaster in U.S. Naval History and the Fifty-Year Fight to Exonerate an Innocent Man*, by Lynn Vincent and Sara Vladic. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018. 592 pages. \$28.

“Japanese submarine slammed two torpedoes into our side, Chief. We was comin’ back from the island of Tinian . . . just delivered the bomb, the Hiroshima bomb. Eleven hundred men went into the water. Vessel went down in twelve minutes. . . . Very first light, Chief, the sharks come cruisin’” As his dramatic monologue continues in Steven Spielberg’s 1975 movie *Jaws*, Captain Quint reveals the horrors the real survivors had faced thirty years earlier following the World War II sinking of USS *Indianapolis* (CA 35).

Just after midnight on 30 July 1945, the Imperial Japanese Navy submarine *I-58* torpedoed *Indianapolis* between Guam and Leyte. Of the ship’s 1,195-man crew, 879 died. An estimated three hundred died immediately or soon after; the remainder were killed by sharks or drowned owing to exhaustion, delirium, and injuries. Only 316 hands survived to be rescued three-plus days later. In December 1945, a Navy general court-martial found Captain Charles B. McVay III, *Indy*’s skipper, guilty of hazarding his vessel by failing to zigzag. In 1968, burdened by the loss

of his crew, McVay committed suicide. It would be another thirty-two years before a congressional inquiry exonerated him and cleared his Navy record.

In meticulous detail, Lynn Vincent and Sara Vladic chronicle the complete history of *Indianapolis*, from the keel laying of the *Portland*-class heavy cruiser in 1930 to its discovery at the bottom of the Philippine Sea in 2017. Using its wartime service as the flagship of the Pacific Fleet, the authors build their story around *Indianapolis* the ship, but at its core this book is about people and accountability. In a military system under which a ship’s captain has absolute accountability, the authors expertly tackle the challenge of convincing readers that McVay was convicted unjustly and his exoneration was appropriate.

The story unfolds in five chronological books. “The Kamikaze (Spring 1945)” introduces the ship, key members of its crew, and its wartime missions, including coverage of a kamikaze strike that sent the ship back to California for repairs. “The Mission (July 1945)” describes the Manhattan Project and *Indy*’s secret mission to transport the bomb

“Little Boy” from California to Tinian Island. “The Deep (July 30–August 4, 1945)” details events leading up to the attack, the sinking, and the rescue. “Trial and Scandal (August 5, 1945–June 30, 1949)” summarizes the legal proceedings and argues persuasively that the process was tainted. The last book, “An Innocent Man (Summer 1999),” ties together the concerted efforts of a few individuals that led to McVay’s exoneration.

Short sections covering periods between 1997 and 2005 follow each chronological book, tracking the efforts of Captain William J. Toti, the skipper of USS *Indianapolis* (SSN 697), *Indy*’s namesake submarine, to locate Mochitsura Hashimoto, submarine commander who sank *Indianapolis* and testified at the 1945 court-martial, and gain his support to exonerate McVay. These sections bolster rather than interrupt the flow of the primary story, particularly in the last book, and culminate with coverage of the sixtieth-anniversary gathering of survivors and their families in 2005. The story concludes with a short “Final Log Entry” about the discovery of the cruiser 18,000 feet below the surface of the Philippine Sea seventy-two years after it was sunk.

In dividing their work, Vincent, a USN veteran and author of numerous nonfiction books, focused on the delivery of the bomb, the court-martial, and McVay’s subsequent exoneration, while Vladic, an acclaimed documentary filmmaker and the world’s leading expert on *Indianapolis*, focused on the survivors and their families. Their joint passion to tell the whole story of *Indy* and its crew is evident throughout the book.

While the story is well constructed and captivating, the book is also a well-documented, scholarly work. The

authors combine hundreds of hours of interviews with survivors, rescue crews, family members, and friends with primary sources, including official Navy records, and numerous photographs, charts, graphs, and maps to produce a full understanding of what happened and why. The “Final Sailing List,” cross-referenced from eight sources, is a fitting tribute to the ship’s 1,195 crewmembers.

The twenty-two-page bibliography seemingly references every document, article, interview, film, and book ever produced on *Indianapolis*, including Doug Stanton’s *New York Times* best seller *In Harm’s Way: The Sinking of the USS Indianapolis* (Holt, 2001). Supported by years of research and hundreds of additional interviews, Vincent and Vladic’s *Indianapolis* should be the first choice for new audiences fascinated with the excerpt from Quint’s war story. For those familiar with the sinking and its aftermath, *Indianapolis* is worthy of your attention as the definitive account of this World War II tragedy.

JEFFREY BOVARNICK



Kamikaze: Japan’s Last Bid for Victory, by Adrian Stewart. Philadelphia: Pen and Sword Aviation, 2020. 209 pages. \$29.95.

The very first, and possibly the second, “suicide dive” that Japanese pilots made in World War II occurred on the first day of Japan’s war against the United States, during the attack on Pearl Harbor and other sites on Oahu. Although as the author of *Kamikaze: Japan’s Last Bid for Victory* notes, these pilots’ missions were fundamentally different from those that came later, “the motives behind them help to